

Film-Philosophy

International Salon-Journal (ISSN 1466-4615)

Vol. 9 No. 41, July 2005

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Carax and the Ambiguities -- A Book That Needs To Fail, Perhaps:
On Daly and Dowd's *Leos Carax*

Fergus Daly and Garin Dowd

Leos Carax

Manchester and New York: [Manchester University Press](#), 2003

ISBN 0-7190-6315-9

188 pp.

Fergus Daly and Garin Dowd's *Leos Carax* is published in Manchester University Press's French Film Directors series, a series which has in the past dedicated volumes to filmmakers such as Beineix, Besson, Blier, Chabrol, Renoir, and Truffaut. Whilst it cannot be doubted that [Carax](#) deserves attention as one of France's most idiosyncratic directors who has consistently produced films that reveal a very personal vision influenced by equally personal viewing and reading tastes, one has to wonder if the four feature-length films that constitute Carax's main body of work to date provide enough substance for a book-length study of this kind. In reading this volume, one is tempted to think that perhaps they do not, for, especially in the first chapter dealing with *Boy Meets Girl* (1984), *Mauvais Sang* (1986), and Carax's **nouvelle vague** inheritance, we find many long historical and theoretical digressions that most often remain somewhat disembodied from the supposed main focus of the book -- such passages appearing, then, to act as filler which bulks out the somewhat meagre primary matter.

In one such passage, for instance, we encounter an in-depth discussion of the four fundamental principles of the Baroque which enable us to apprehend the possibility of a cinematic language that breaks with

Renaissance forms (45-49). Many passages such as this (in spite of their indebtedness to other thinkers -- the discussion of the Baroque, for instance, being very reliant on the writings of Buci-Glucksmann) provide very lucid and interesting syntheses of concepts not often associated with analyses of cinema, and more often found in literary analysis. Whilst such an approach is no doubt justified in any study of Carax whose antecedents and influences are to be found in the literary realm as often as in the world of cinema, what is missing in Daly and Dowd's approach is a full articulation/application of the findings of these secondary analyses to the actual body of work that they are purportedly writing about. So, for instance, this long exergue on the Baroque actually leads into a reflection on the way in which Beineix's *_La Lune dans le caniveau_* comes to exemplify the mannerist tendencies and highly artificial modes that were seen to characterise the **cinéma du look** with which Carax's oeuvre is often associated.

This incessant straying away from the main focus of the book is undoubtedly the result of one of the volume's main aims. For whilst the authors state their primary intention as being to find a critical language able to account for the challenges that Carax's films pose to narrational and imagistic normativity in the cinema, to register the shocks that these films produce in their attempts to think **otherwise** (17), the authors are also at pains to situate Carax in a certain lineage so as to register both his similarities to and differences from directors such as Beineix, Denis, Garrel, Godard, Rivette, Ruiz, and Techine. Indeed, the authors rightly assert that Carax is situated in the lineage of the **nouvelle vague**, 'in that he reflects through a complex interplay of homage and allusion his relationship with precursors and influences, occasionally the better to free himself of the stranglehold these latter can effect upon the filmmaker' (22). It is somewhat ironic then that this desire to reference so many other texts seems at times to exert on the authors a stranglehold from which they have some trouble wresting themselves. At times, for instance, we are privy to reasonably extended discussions of the work of directors seemingly far removed from the concerns of Carax, such as Lars von Trier. When this happens, invariably, potentially interesting and contentious points are raised about these other oeuvres -- such as the statement that von Trier's *_Dancer in the Dark_* 'required Bjork rather than a professional actor' because it is 'a reflection on 'affects' and forces, rather than affections and characters' (21) -- but these points cannot be fully expanded upon since the analysis, as it should, returns to its examination of Carax and his films. In other passages, meanwhile, this desire to establish profound

genealogical links between Carax and other directors leads to some very problematic suggestions, none more so to my mind than the implication that the character played by Denis Lavant in Claire Denis's *Beau travail* is one of the possible futures from the virtual present of the character Lavant plays in Carax's *Les Amants du Pont Neuf* (1991), and this, seemingly, because both characters dance.

Much the same problem can be found in the book's discussion of the literary intertexts of Carax, which, as indicated above, are numerous. Thus, Artaud, Baudelaire, Beckett, Celine, Cocteau, Kafka, Kundera, Melville, Rimbaud, Shakespeare, Tolstoy, and Zola (amongst others) are all cited as literary points of reference for Carax, authors with whose work Carax's own shares certain affinities or else explicitly cites. The problem with such an approach when dealing with a filmmaker such as Carax is that this list could go on almost interminably: in other words, so great are the potential intertexts that make up Carax's own work that one will most probably always miss some, and the research methodology used is therefore highly reliant on chance encounters, on a subjective process of recognition that does not ultimately tell us very much about Carax, especially since some of the main literary references he uses are alluded to only briefly and superficially. For instance, the references to and influence of Louis-Ferdinand Celine in all of Carax's films is far greater than the authors here imply -- indeed the opening lines of *Boy Meets Girl* are a direct quotation from Celine's *Mort a credit*. One might even be tempted to suggest that Carax has in a somewhat perverse manner modelled his own career on Celine's, as he also (as Daly and Dowd suggest of Carax) produced an aesthetic in which there is a '*necessity of failure*' which, whilst appearing to stem from a self-defeating talent, comes in fact from 'a performative defection from selfhood' (173-4).

And so with the philosophical concepts used to aid in our understanding of these films, for whilst the main philosophical filter through which the analysis here passes is a decidedly Deleuzian one, concepts are also borrowed from Bataille, Benjamin (Andrew and Walter), Blanchot, de Certeau, Descartes, Derrida, Foucault, Heraclitus, Jameson, Kierkegaard, Leibniz, Lucretius, Lyotard, Nietzsche, Serres, and Spinoza. With regards to the Deleuzian philosophy on which the approach taken here is very reliant, many interesting readings are proposed but, again, rarely expanded into a full analysis of how the films or characters under discussion actually come to articulate the philosophical concept being used. So, for instance, the authors suggest that the character of Alex in

Mauvais Sang comes to embody 'a splitting of time in the subject . . . at one and the same time the weight of the past and the giddy lightness of the present' (69), but rather than explain this fully the authors tell us merely that: 'In order to dramatise this split into I and ego Carax employs every cinematic means at his disposal: **mise en abyme**, mirroring, doubling and reflection' (69). Similarly, the suggestion that Carax's use of speech in his first films obviates the need for voice-over and becomes indicative of the emergence of larval subjects is fascinating but merely a tease without further elaboration, as is their suggestion that 'decisions as to angle, framing, lighting and **mise en scene** [in _Pola X_] facilitate . . . the displacement of a psychoanalytic interpretation', presenting instead 'bodies, communicating mutely and intensely at the edge of bifurcating and dissolving identities' (156).

It becomes clear throughout this book that Carax's work is for the authors a kind of constant invocation of philosophy, for different characters or settings in the films provide them with apparent cinematic equivalences of philosophical concepts found in various of Deleuze's texts. Once more, however, this approach seems somewhat slapdash, relying on chance recognition and coincidence rather than a systematic exploration, the methodology employed thereby being akin to a game of snap played by the authors with two decks of cards, a Deleuze deck and a Carax deck. And yet, whilst it no doubt sounds like I can find nothing of worth in this volume and no salvation for it on any level, I cannot bring myself to reject it totally, for the simple reason that it does manage to reproduce for the reader the shocks that the films hold for the authors; or, to put this another way, the book makes me want to visit the films again and, what is more, not just to watch them but to try and follow through on some of the possibilities opened up by this book and to think them differently. Given that the authors see Carax's films as an attempt to think the world **otherwise**, there opens up the possibility here, of course, that the book itself operates as a kind of **mise en abyme**. Indeed, at the end of the chapter dealing with Carax's adaptation of Melville's _Pierre or the Ambiguities_ (in French _Pierre ou les ambiguïtés_, hence _Pola X_ (1999), the X signifying the fact that the filmed version came from the tenth version of the screenplay to issue from Carax's computer) it is suggested that here 'Literature . . . becomes the difference of film; the figurative (image) propensities of the latter interact with the discursive (linguistic) elements of the former, while in this interaction is sustained and maintained the figural as reservoir of that difference itself' (172). Could this not, in a sense, be described as the process at work in this book, in which various discursive

strategies, that are never sufficient in themselves, exert a differential force upon the cinematic product by dint of their inability sufficiently to account for the images whose forms they can ultimately only ever undo and not explicate? If so then other intriguing possibilities can be entertained. For instance, if, as the authors claim, Carax's attitude towards appropriation is akin to that of the sampler, then could this not also furnish us with an explanation for the vertiginous referential survey that the authors create in their enumeration of cinematic and literary intertexts? Could it in fact be that this methodology which I have criticised is in actuality a means to explicate through emulation and thereby to create a self-referential vortex that collapses in on itself and necessarily fails as must Carax's aesthetic?

As much as I would like to believe that this is the case, this reading of the text is, I fear, itself a fanciful **mise en abyme**, a reading of a reading and one that does not really hold up to scrutiny. This is not to say that there is nothing to praise here, however, quite the contrary. Indeed this volume will be a valuable resource for anyone wishing to examine Carax's films further, as it gives much useful background information and references. More than this, as I have suggested, many of the ideas presented here truly do open up new ways of seeing these films. However, it is the very richness of possibilities of these films that this book allows us to glimpse that is its own ultimate downfall, for whilst much of the book seems like filler, as I began by suggesting, it actually demonstrates to its own detriment that Carax's oeuvre, as minimal as it may be, needs no filler, and can inspire and provoke a far greater need for reflection than the entire body of work of other far more prolific directors.

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Greg Hainge, 'Carax and the Ambiguities -- A Book That Needs To Fail, Perhaps: On Daly and Dowd's *_Leos Carax_*', *_Film-Philosophy_*, vol. 9 no. 41, July 2005 <<http://www.film-philosophy.com/vol9-2005/n41hainge>>.

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